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Invoking Lakshmi: The Goddess of Wealth in Song and Ceremony. By Constantina Rhodes. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010. ISBN 978-1-4384-3321-9, pp. xii, 279.

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The ambition of this carefully researched, well-written book is to serve as a comprehensive guide to the Hindu goddess Lakṣmī, including exploration of her presentation in Sanskrit texts, modes of her worship, and the realm of prosperity that she embodies.

The book is divided into four parts. The first part examines the portrayal of Lakṣmī in Vedic, Puranic, and Tantric texts. In the Vedic hymns, all that is auspicious, or *śrī*, is celebrated, and the qualities that characterize auspiciousness are linked together. By the late Vedic period, Lakṣmī emerges as an embodiment of all that is *śrī* such that “the Vedas now sing of *śrī* (Śrī) and *lakṣmī* (Lakṣmī), sometimes as two independent goddesses, and at other times as one and the same goddess” (p. 19). In the Puranas, *śrī* comes to be personified consistently as the goddess Lakṣmī, who is now affiliated closely with Viṣṇu. The Puranas portray other female forms, including human women, as embodiments of Lakṣmī and identify her with the four “wealths” or goals (*caturartha*) of human life: *kāma* (sensual pleasure), *artha* (material prosperity), *dharma* (balanced, righteous living), and *mokṣa* (spiritual liberation). In the Tantras, Lakṣmī’s identity as the bestower of auspiciousness and bounty persists, but she emerges also in “powerful forms that the worshiper may access and draw into alignment with his or her own being” (p. 47). Kundalini Shakti, the power of spiritual transformation within the body, is portrayed as a form of Lakṣmī, as are the *siddhis*, powers that can be achieved through tantric practice. Rhodes traces Lakṣmī’s nature as the lotus goddess, “force of life and regeneration, and source of magnificent wisdom,” throughout all these layers of text, as well as the contrasting representations of her antithesis, Alakṣmī, the embodiment of inauspiciousness.

Part two examines how Vedic, Puranic, and Tantric songs about Lakṣmī function as vehicles for “calling forth her presence” (p. 61). Vedic hymns to Sri are to be chanted in conjunction with ritual action to attain prosperity. In the Puranas, chanting hymns of praise (*stotra*) to Lakṣmī is presented as a way to please her, to call the goddess forth, and to “prepare for receiving her blessings” (p. 69). In Tantra, songs invoking Lakṣmī not only glorify the goddess, but also function as “vehicles for preparing the worshiper to meet the goddess as she rises to the surface of his consciousness” (p. 71). While both Vedic and Tantric texts assume the potency of their verses as *mantra*, Puranic texts also emphasize the prayerful nature of songs to Lakṣmī as expressions of devotion to the goddess.

Part three focuses on ritual devotion to Lakṣmī in ceremonial worship. The performance of Lakṣmī puja enables the devotee to construct a ritual arena that is infused with the power and essence of auspiciousness. In this section, Rhodes presents an annotated Lakṣmī puja text translated from one compiled by Punadit Rajesh Dixit. The fourth part of the book offers translations of the Vedic, Puranic, and Tantric songs to the goddess on which the first two parts of the book are based. In her epilogue, Rhodes notes that the songs offer two types of prayer to the goddess: “One is to ask for prosperity in any of its forms. The other is to ask for access to the source of that prosperity. . . . For the first type of prayer, we are the ones who do the invoking” (205). Hence the book concludes by returning to its title, *Invoking Lakshmi*, as a

reminder of what the whole project aims to accomplish. The final portion of the book consists of transliterations of the Sanskrit texts on which the book is based.

In the introduction, Rhodes notes that the book is intended to be a resource for three different (and certainly sometimes overlapping) categories of readers: scholars and students of Indic religions; spiritual seekers; and devotees of the goddess in any of her forms, who “will find in this volume a worship manual” (p. 6). This is an ambitious and worthy undertaking, as these different types of audiences all have legitimate but divergent interests in and reasons for picking up this book. It is difficult, of course, to please such a diverse array of audiences. I found myself, as a member of the first category, yearning for more of Rhodes’s scholarly commentary on the materials she has so deftly translated and presented to us. I also would have appreciated more attention to lived ritual performance of Lakṣmī worship, which makes an appearance in the introduction but recedes quickly to the background. While there is certainly much more to say about Lakṣmī, especially with respect to contemporary field research, beyond what is covered here, the book certainly succeeds in offering a detailed portrait of the goddess in Sanskrit texts and establishing a firm foundation for further Lakṣmī studies.